



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Reverend Peter Thompson, *Associate Rector for Formation & Liturgy*

In the Depths

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 21, 2021

The First Sunday in Lent

Based on Genesis 9:8-17; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

Praise to the holiest in the height

And in the depths be praise!

Amen.

In just a few minutes—ten if you're lucky, fifteen if you're not—I will conclude my sermon and walk down the steep steps of this pulpit. Paolo, our Organist & Choirmaster, will play quietly as I return to the chancel. Once my fellow clergy and I take our places in the center, Paolo will bring his short meditation to a close. Our Rector will then lead us in something called the Nicene Creed. "We believe in one God," he'll say. "The Father, the Almighty," we'll reply, "maker of heaven and earth."

Several of you have sheepishly admitted that, when we reach this point in the service, you occasionally leave the livestream on in the background while you head to the kitchen for another cup of coffee or to start making brunch. I get it: the Creed is boring, and you don't feel the need to recite the same esoteric abstractions for the umpteenth time.

Even when we're all together in the building and you can't sneak off quite as easily, we clergy can tell that your attention starts to drift when we turn to this exposition on the Trinity. We know that the Creed isn't the most riveting part of the service for you, as much as you love "our Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father," and as devoted as you are to the "one holy catholic and apostolic church."

Nonetheless, we continue to put this jumble of philosophizing in front of you Sunday after Sunday after Sunday. We do this partly because our Prayer Book tells us that the Creed is required at a principal Sunday celebration of the Eucharist. If we suddenly left the Creed out, we'd probably hear from our Bishop. But we also include the Creed because we believe that, though we learn a lot from exploring the small snippets of scripture assigned to us by the lectionary, it's also important for us to stay connected to the larger Christian story and to the Christians who have told that story throughout the ages. The Creed reminds us of who God is and links us to Christians who have been uttering the words it contains for centuries upon centuries.

We actually make regular use of two ancient creeds at St. Bart's. The Nicene Creed is the one we recite on most Sundays, at least at the 11 am Eucharist. But when our worship incorporates the service of Morning Prayer, or when it includes baptism, confirmation, or the renewal of our baptismal vows, we recite something called the Apostles' Creed instead.

¹ From John Henry Newman's "The Dream of Gerontius." A hymn that derives from the larger poem and includes this excerpt can be found in *The Hymnal 1982* at 445/446.

If you haven't noticed any difference between the two, that's because in many ways they are quite similar. In fact, the biggest difference between the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed is length. The Apostles' Creed functions as a kind of tighter summary of the Nicene Creed, leaving out all those pesky bits about proceeding and begetting. The Apostles' Creed is simpler, more concise. It sticks to the basics.

Interestingly, the Apostles' Creed does contain one striking detail that the Nicene Creed leaves out. Both acknowledge that Jesus died, that Pontius Pilate had something to do with Jesus' death, and that Jesus was buried. Yet only the Apostles' Creed adds this: "he descended to the dead." Older English versions of the Apostles' Creed use even starker language: "he descended into hell."

It's a claim we can easily brush past, but it's also a highly significant one: *he descended to the dead; he descended into hell*. He didn't just die a human death; he wasn't just resurrected, changing our notion of death forever. In between death and resurrection, he descended; he came to know not only what it was like for a human being to die but also what it was like for a human being to be dead. He wasn't whisked immediately away to his throne in a glorious heaven above; he shared the same ignominious fate as every other mortal.

Both progressives and conservatives have expressed concern about this aspect of Christian teaching: progressives because the whole idea of hell tends to make them uncomfortable, conservatives because they worry that Jesus' sojourn into hell might blur the line between humanity and divinity and the similar line between sinner and saint.

However, Scripture supports the assertion made by the Apostles' Creed that Jesus entered into the land of the dead. The letter to the Ephesians suggests that the one "who ascended into heaven, so that he might fill all things" is "the same one" who "descended into the lower parts of the earth."² Jesus himself speaks of spending three days in the earth's heart.³ And, in today's enigmatic Second Lesson, the first letter of Peter claims that, after his own death, Jesus visited people from the time of Noah, who themselves had long been dead, and made a proclamation to them.

Jesus' journey into hell was an act of great solidarity on his part. By descending into depths of hell, Jesus proved what Paul, in his letter to the Romans, would later proudly declare: nothing can separate us from the love of God—not the most alluring temptations, not the scariest wild beasts, not the great agony of death, not even death itself. God does not let us face anything alone.⁴ Even in the one place where we least expect God, God is there.

"I know someone who was in hell," the theologian Jürgen Moltmann writes, "[that person] is Jesus Christ... Since Christ descended into hell, what we experience as hell, and everything else that can be called hell, has been objectively transformed. Now there is someone who has brought hope into hell. Dante is confuted. There is someone who has thrown hell open and led out the dead, as we see him doing in every Orthodox Easter icon. If hell was the place of God-forsakenness, ever since Christ's descent into hell it has been this no more. If in hell the devilish spirits of torment rule over human beings, ever since the resurrection of the dead they have been robbed of their victory."⁵

But it's important to note that Jesus does not descend into hell only to rescue the good people and transport them to heaven. The first letter of Peter makes clear that Jesus died as a righteous person for the unrighteous. What's more, after his death, Jesus directs his proclamation to the *disobedient* spirits—

² Ephesians 4:9-10.

³ Matthew 12:40.

⁴ See Romans 8:38-39.

⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today's World*, 144, 65.

the ones who got things wrong, not the ones who got things right. Jesus makes redemption possible within the grave itself. “Because Christ was in hell,” Moltmann claims, “no one who is in hell is without hope any more...this means that for Christian faith hell is no longer what it was once supposed to be—religion’s everlasting torture chamber. Its gates are open. Its walls have been broken down. In hell the trumpet signaling liberation has already been heard. The person who sticks to Christ has no need to fear hell, nor can that person ever threaten others with the tortures of hell.”⁶

If this vision of Christ liberating hell is reassuring, it is also unsettling, too. Aren’t the people who are in hell supposed to be there? How will we maintain decency and order if bad people get a second chance, if the line between good and evil is no longer neatly defined? Presbyterian minister Scott Black Johnston, now our neighbor at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, once preached about an elderly gentleman who confronted him at the end of a Sunday school class. “Looking me straight in the eye,” Johnston recalled, “[the man] declared, ‘My Jesus did not descend into hell.’” The man told Johnston that he had long made a point of refusing to join in the affirmation of Jesus’ descent when his congregation recited the Nicene Creed. The man could not believe in a God who would “send Jesus to the torment reserved for the Adolf Hitlers of the world.”⁷

And yet, though theologians have quibbled over the exact details, this is what the Christian tradition has long maintained—that Jesus descended, if not to the torment reserved for evildoers, then at least to the general place in which that torment occurs; that even the worst sinners we have known, the people we most want to condemn and destroy, are not ultimately beyond the reach of God’s grace. “The gospel,” Episcopal priest Fleming Rutledge writes, “has to be good news *not only* for victims *but also* for perpetrators. If we say that Jesus Christ descended into hell, perhaps we mean most of all *the hell of the perpetrators.*”⁸

A few days ago, on Ash Wednesday, many of us began the season of Lent with an evening conversation on Zoom. The conversation started out well: a good crowd of us gathered, and my fellow clergy said helpful, motivating things about the opportunities Lent provides us. About 30 minutes into our conversation, I was starting to speak myself when suddenly loud music interrupted me. I muted the source but was soon interrupted by even more disturbing, vulgar sounds. A voice spoke directly to me, in front of dozens of my parishioners, accusing me of the vilest deeds. I scrambled to remove the bad actors who were causing this havoc, and finally, after facing difficulty in doing so, decided to shut the meeting down. Our visitors, by swiftly turning our calm, high-minded gathering into total chaos, had shown us that Lent is no joke. Satan the Disrupter is real and active, and he is a formidable enemy.

In the hours afterwards, as I reckoned with my shock, my embarrassment, my anger at the perpetrators, and my anger at myself for not having kept the meeting more secure, it was you all who preached to me. You thanked me for doing what I could; you expressed concern; you re-assured me that everything was going to be ok. And you all taught me what it means to inhabit the radical love of Jesus. “If there is a lesson in here for those of us on that Zoom,” one of you wrote, “it has to do with forgiveness of sins.” Another one of you, during Night Prayer, asked us to pray for those who had disrupted our meeting—“because if they would do something like that, then they are in need of our prayers.” Your generosity to those who sought to harm us reflected the generosity of our Savior who descended from the heights of heaven to the plains of earth out of care for humankind and who descended again from the plains of earth into the deepest canyons of hell because, to him, even the disobedient dead mattered.

⁶ Moltmann, 66.

⁷ Scott Black Johnston, “A Good Friday Sermon: Harrowing,” in *Exploring and Proclaiming the Apostles’ Creed* (ed. Roger E. Van Harn), 131-132.

⁸ Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*, 453.

In one of my favorite passages of all of literature, Rainer Maria Rilke encourages an aspiring poet to embrace the challenges and struggles he encounters. “We have no reason to harbor any mistrust against our world,” Rilke tells the young poet, “for it is not against us. If it has terrors, they are our terrors; if it has abysses, these abysses belong to us; if there are dangers, we must try to love them. And if only we arrange our life in accordance with the principle which tells us that we must always trust in the difficult, then what now appears to us as the most alien will become our most intimate and trusted experience. How could we forget those ancient myths that stand at the beginning of all races, the myths about dragons that at the last moment are transformed into princesses? Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love.”⁹

This Lent, as we continue to travel through the wilderness of the COVID-19 pandemic, you may face your own battle with Satan, the Disrupter, that Great Dragon. But when temptations ensnare you, when wild beasts encircle you, when the deep canyons of hell overwhelm you, have no fear. Act, as best you can, with beauty and courage. All is not lost. Where you are going, Jesus has gone before. Reach out in love, knowing that his love will uphold yours.

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⁹ Rainer Maria Rilke, <https://www.carrothers.com/rilke8.htm>.